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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 003842

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SOUTHCOM FOR POLAD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [CO](#)

SUBJECT: DECLINING OFFICIALIST LIBERAL PARTY LIKELY TO PIN  
FUTURE ON CESAR GAVIRIA

REF: A. BOGOTA 2216

[1](#)B. 04 BOGOTA 11705

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 B & D.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Officialist Liberal Party (PLC), Colombia's largest and oldest, has been declining nationally. Several dozen Congressional "dissident" Liberals are set to leave the party and formalize a new political movement, likely to be called Apertura Liberal (Liberal Opening), which plans to run its own list of candidates for Congress and support President Uribe for reelection in 2006. Former VP and Finance Minister Juan Manuel Santos, a disaffected Liberal leader, accepted a role as President Uribe's point man on reelection. The majority of party members, including the current PLC President Juan Cristo, believe that the only way to reinvigorate the PLC is to make former President Cesar Gaviria its unifying leader at the June party convention. After receiving the public backing of several dozen PLC members of Congress, Gaviria broke his silence on April 12 and indicated a desire to run the party. While Gaviria and former President Alfonso Lopez have publicly opposed Uribe's reelection, the President continues to be the unchallenged front-runner for 2006. Provided reelection is not struck down by the Constitutional Court, the PLC has little chance of defeating Uribe. End Summary.

PLC's Evolving Numbers  
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[1](#)2. (U) Colombia's oldest party, the Officialist Liberal (PLC), controls the largest number of governorships and departmental assemblies (roughly half of each). At the start of the current Congress in 2002 it held 29 (of 102) Senate seats and 49 (of 166) House seats. However, a move to sanction nine Senators in November (Ref B) reduced PLC Senate representation to 20. Soon-to-be-completed negotiations to form a new dissident Liberal umbrella party for the 2006 elections will reduce the PLC numbers to 11 in the Senate and approximately 20 in the House. The new party, tentatively called Apertura Liberal (AL), plans to support President Uribe (himself a former PLC member) for reelection and run unified lists for Congress.

Convention and Presidential Nominee  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) The PLC is laying the groundwork for its national convention to be held in June. Items for the convention include selection of a new PLC head, development of a formal platform, and ground rules for Congressional candidate selection and the party's presidential primary. At present, a ten-person Executive Committee runs the PLC, with a rotating (six month term) presidency. Leading PLC contacts, including current head and Senator Juan Fernando Cristo, favor abolition of the Executive Committee and establishment of a single party leader post. The PLC's nationwide presidential primary is likely to take place in March 2006, and potential candidates include 2002 nominee Horacio Serpa, former Bogota Mayor Enrique Penalosa, and Senators Rafael Pardo and Rodrigo Rivera (Ref A). However, senior party officials tell us that Serpa will not enter the race if reelection is ruled constitutional, and Uribe can run.

The ex-Presidents  
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[1](#)4. (C) Four of the five living ex-Presidents are PLC members. Of the four PLC, only Julio Cesar Turbay has been publicly supportive of reelection for President Uribe. In late March, Alfonso Lopez Michelson, the elder statesman of the group, surprised many observers with a strong public stance against Uribe's reelection. However, many pundits wrote off the octogenarian Lopez's remarks, published in an interview in leading daily El Tiempo, as rambling and mean-spirited. Ernesto Samper, generally viewed with disdain by the public for his narco-financing scandal, has also criticized reelection.

[1](#)5. (C) Early in the Uribe Administration, then-OAS SYG Cesar Gaviria showed signs of affinity and cooperation with the President. However, in recent months Gaviria has become more

critical, staking out a position against reelection and in favor of the 1991 Constitution. Pundits have attributed the change to three factors. First, President Uribe spoke negatively about the role of political parties when addressing an OAS-sponsored forum on strengthening parties in Cartagena in November 2003 (Gaviria presided over the forum). Subsequently, in a speech in Miami in late 2004, Uribe criticized the M-19 guerrilla amnesty, which occurred under Gaviria's watch. Third, Uribe launched a series of criticisms of Colombia's 1991 Constitution, the crown jewel of the Gaviria Presidency.

16. (C) In a recent conversation with PolCouns, Gaviria spoke highly of Uribe and insisted that he remains in constant touch with Casa Narino (the Presidential Palace). Defending the 1991 Constitution, he said he was opposed in principle to reelection but assumed it would pass the Constitutional Court. He underscored that Uribe had to be "generous" with pending reelection implementing legislation. The Constitutional Court had to be convinced that others would not be disadvantaged or that it did not create a system stacked in Uribe's favor.

17. (C) However, Gaviria was critical of Uribe's style of government, noting the Administration's lack of depth, with few key advisors. The idea that one man (i.e. Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo) was conducting the entire peace process was "unbelievable." Gaviria also charged that Uribe has damaged political parties in Colombia. We will end up like Venezuela if he is not careful, said Gaviria.

18. (U) On April 11, several dozen PLC members of Congress openly announced their support for Gaviria as sole party head (and for abolishing the Executive Committee and rotating presidency). Gaviria broke his silence the following day and expressed interest in the post. In a radio interview, Gaviria disassociated himself from the "neoliberal" label, called for the PLC to back a "Colombian version of social democracy," and strongly defended the 1991 Constitution. While Horacio Serpa, the PLC's 2002 presidential candidate, called for a "democratic" party leader selection process and noted his ideological (Serpa leans farther left) differences with Gaviria, former Prosecutor General Alfonso Gomez Mendez, a prominent Serpa backer, announced he was open to the Gaviria option. Ernesto Samper, in a April 17 interview in El Tiempo, welcomed a Gaviria PLC presidency provided the party rank and file vote in such a fashion. However, Samper said he would stand with Serpa if the latter continued to resist Gaviria as PLC head.

#### Juan Manuel Santos Steps Back Into Political Spotlight

19. (C) Leading Liberal figure Juan Manuel Santos, Vice President under Gaviria and Finance Minister under Andres Pastrana (a Conservative), recently defected from the PLC. In a conversation with Embassy on April 7, Santos attributed his move to two factors. First, he lamented polarization within the PLC and the radicalization of its platform. He criticized the PLC for allowing leftist elements (led by Senator Piedad Cordoba) to dominate internal debate. A strong proponent of free trade and market opening, Santos felt he no longer fit in the PLC. Second, Santos welcomed the formation of Apertura Liberal, whose members included most of Santos' political allies and former colleagues, and embraced its stated purpose of supporting the reelection of President Uribe. Santos recently accepted a role as coordinator of Uribe's reelection efforts.

#### Comment

10. (C) While the PLC remains strong in certain regions of the country, in particular the Atlantic Coast, its national strength has diminished. In the Congress, its most centrist and charismatic figures appear set to defect to the Apertura Liberal movement, leaving the PLC with less than half of its 2002 nominal representation in both houses of Congress. Serpa's complaints to the contrary, Gaviria is likely to take over the party in June, a move in the direction of internal cohesion. It remains to be seen, however, if Gaviria alone can bring the PLC back to national prominence. If reelection stands, the PLC on its own cannot challenge President Uribe in 2006. Were the election to go to a runoff (required by law if no candidate attains a majority in the first round), a potential alliance between the PLC and leftist parties in a second round would still face an uphill battle against the popular incumbent.

WOOD